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

THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICATION OF THE GUNÛ-SIGNS.

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The excavations of the French at Tello and of The University of Pennsylvania Expedition at Nippur have at last revealed the more important archaic forms of the Assyrian and Babylonian signs, without which all attempts to trace the origin of the cuneiform characters have necessarily been only in part successful. Availing themselves of this new material, and although working in accordance with fundamentally different principles, Professors Delitzsch and Hilprecht have already made invaluable contributions toward the solving of the riddles connected with the origin of the most common signs. The new field has been well opened up by these pioneers, but almost everything yet remains to be done before it will be completely in the possession of the Assyriologist.

Starting with the testimony of the Assyrians themselves that certain characters, which they designated in their syllabaries as gunû-signs, were formed from simple signs, Professor Delitzsch, by a comparison of the archaic forms, has shown in his *Entstehung des ältesten Schriftsystems* (=EäS.) that the distinctive mark, whereby the gunû are distinguished from their corresponding simple signs, consists of three or four parallel lines, written in front of or on the face of the simple character. Thus, for example, from

 (Assyrian ) iṣ, is formed  (Assyrian ), gunû

iṣ (S^c 93). He has also demonstrated conclusively that the same distinctive lines appear in many more than the eleven characters designated as gunû-signs by the authors of the syllabaries. Indeed it is safe to say that this *motif* was employed by the primitive sign-maker more frequently than any other in the creation of his characters. Here is evidently to be found one of the most important keys thus far discovered with which to






unlock the mysteries still surrounding the origin of many of the oldest and at the same time the most obscure signs.

From a study of the use of the *gunû-motif*, Professor Delitzsch further draws the induction that it symbolizes an increasing, a heightening, a *Potenzierung* of the idea represented by the original sign (p. 66 sq.). Accepting this conclusion, however, one finds it difficult to follow him in the explanation of the origin of the *gunû*-signs when he says: "Jede Hinzufügung bedeutet eine Mehrung, Steigerung, die Vier ist die gesteigerte, potenzierte Zwei, also sollte wohl mit ihrer Ein- oder Vorfügung die *Potenzierung* des Begriffs des einfachen Zeichens symbolisiert werden? Ich antworte: Ja."¹ Although the explanation here presented seems very simple to one accustomed to abstract thinking, when analyzed it becomes evident that in reality it bespeaks a mental development scarcely to be expected in the primitive man. To put one mark by another and recognize that the one has been doubled, or by writing the same sign two or three times to indicate the idea of plurality, is quite different from conceiving of the *Potenzierung eines Begriffs*, and then representing this by three or four conventional lines. Granting that the early sign-makers possessed as highly developed a mathematical sense as is claimed, it must be seriously questioned whether they were able to depart so far from the concrete as this explanation requires. Furthermore no analogies are cited in support of such a departure. Instead, as Professor Delitzsch himself has demonstrated so clearly, in every other sign which can be analyzed with certainty, a picture of some concrete object with which the sign-maker was familiar furnished him the materials with which he constructed his characters. Hence we are compelled to reject this ingenious theory unless proof, of whose existence there is no suggestion, can be adduced in its support. If this explanation be rejected one must be sought which will be concrete and at the same time consonant with the mental development of the sign-maker and with the methods which he used in expressing his ideas. In seeking symbols whereby he could represent these ideas it was natural that he should employ the objects with which he was most familiar, and, therefore, it is not surprising that ten and possibly twelve of the original signs or *motifs* represented parts of the human body. Of these, two—the arm and the hand—were most

¹ *EAS.*, p. 66.

commonly used as symbols of strength. In reality they have the same content, for the hand, being the more important part, represented the arm; and both in turn originally the strength of the man. By a most natural transference, both likewise came to be used as symbols of not merely the might of a man but also of abstract power or strength (ID and ŠÚ, imûku). It is the hand, however, which in Babylonian and Assyrian literature is constantly used to represent the strength and power of a man when these are exerted so as to affect and influence persons and objects. Throughout the historical inscriptions runs the familiar refrain, "my hand conquered," or "the peoples, the spoil of my hand" (niši kišitti kâtia). The pious Assyrian and Babylonian kings frequently assert that they "built temples with their hand," meaning that the temples arose as a result of the exertion of their power and influence. "To take one's hand" (šabātu or aḥāzu), that is to communicate strength to another by taking his hand, is a regular idiom whereby the idea of helping another is expressed; while "to remove (nakāru) the hand from another" is equivalent to desertion or rebellion against him. Thus it is that in the most ordinary expressions the hand (kātu, represented by the sign ŠÚ) is used in precisely the same way and with the same force as the gunū-motif, namely, to indicate the impartation of might or power to a person or object. One quotation will suffice to remind the Hebrew student of the same usage in the Old Testament: "The Lord hath spoken of David saying, By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines and out of the hand of their enemies" (2 Sam. 3:18), where "hand" is twice used in the sense of "power" and once as a medium for the exercise of divine might in the affairs of men.



All of these common Semitic idioms, as well as the function of the hand in actual experience, suggest that the sign, which the sign-maker on *a priori* grounds would be expected to employ when he wished to indicate the communication of power so as to add to the potentiality of a person or thing or to increase the intensity of an action, is the hand. An examination of the archaic form of the ideogram for hand (𐎶) demonstrates that this is precisely what he did. Instead, however, of employing the entire sign, which would have been impracticable, he used, as in other analogous cases, only the most essential elements and at the



same time those easiest to represent, namely, the four fingers. In all the archaic signs for the hand and also when this is united with the arm as in the archaic signs, , id, and , da, the four fingers are represented by four parallel lines, while the thumb is separated from them by a wider space and is represented by a line curving downward to the left. In some cases, as for example , da (Penn., II., No. 87, col. i, 26), the separation is more marked, while in , šú, last line of Uru Kagina,¹ and , id (Penn., II., No. 87, col. ii, 41), the thumb has apparently been left off entirely as unimportant.

The distinction between the four fingers and the thumb and the superior importance of the former becomes more evident when one objectively pictures the act of grasping something with the hand, for in that case it is the four fingers which enclose the object, while the thumb is quite apart from the four fingers and plays the secondary rôle of supplementing them. The Sumerian conception of the importance of the fingers is also best illustrated by the name which they gave to them, "horns of the hand" (ŠÚ.SI). The fact that among Semitic peoples the horn was also a symbol of strength may shed still more light upon the use of the most prominent elements in the hand as the conventional symbols of imparted power.

The reason why four lines are most commonly used as the *gunû-motif* is now evident. Equally significant is it that in no case (as far as I have observed) are more than four lines used. The frequent use of two or three lines, interchangeably with the more common four, may possibly be due to a deliberate purpose on the part of the sign-maker to represent a comparative instead of a superlative *Potenzierung* by means of two or three fingers (only a part of the power of the hand) instead of by four. A study of these cases, however, leads to the conclusion that less than four lines are employed, (1) merely for the sake of convenience, as, for example, when the space is limited, or (2) as the result of the peculiarities of individual scribes. The same sign is sometimes written in one inscription always with four and in another contemporary inscription with but three lines. The same character also is written in the same inscription and the same word

¹ Cf. Amiaud et Méchineau, *Tableau Comparé*, p. 55.







or phrase with a different number of lines. Such conventional variations are of too frequent occurrence in the case of other characters to require further comment. An interesting parallel is found in the archaic Hebrew letter *Kâph* , which is one of the most indisputable derivatives from the Assyrian, in which the sign for hand has been still further conventionalized. The results of the same process reappear in the Hebrew *Yôdh* , which probably originally represented the bent arm and hand. The important point to note, however, is that, as a general rule, the older the inscription the more regularly do the four lines appear, while in the case of the same sign in the later inscriptions, three and often only two lines predominate.















A striking illustration of this conventionalizing process is found in the sign for man, archaic  or . Whether we find in this a picture of a man, drawn for the sake of convenience in a horizontal instead of an upright position, as claimed by Professor Hommel,¹ or with Professor Delitzsch see in it the figure of a man, stretched out with his face to the earth, prostrate before the deity,² it is impossible to conclude with the latter that the three or four vertical lines are the *gunû-motif*; for his interpretation that they represent a "Steigerung der Unterwürfigkeit unter die Götter" is at best a conjecture built upon another conjecture. Granting that the representation is that of a man prostrate on his face before the gods, it is difficult to see how or why the idea of greater subjection to the gods should also be introduced, for the position itself represents superlative *Unterwürfigkeit*. Furthermore, although the picture is evidently very conventional, and therefore imperfect, it is exceedingly improbable that such an important member as the arm or at least the hand would be completely ignored. The three or four vertical lines are exactly in the position where those members are to be expected, and constitute a representation of the hand, which is in perfect harmony with the exceedingly conventionalized picture before us, and analogous with that which has already been observed in other archaic characters.





In the light of the present study it is possible to trace historically and to illustrate each step in the development of the

¹ *Gesch. Bab. u. Assyri.*, p. 35.

² *EAS.*, p. 194.

parallel lines which constitute the distinctive element in the *gunû*-signs. The original symbol of a man's strength (*imûḫu*), when communicated to a person, object, or action, was the forearm or hand. Of the two signs representing respectively the forearm and hand, naturally the latter, being the simpler, was chosen when a *motif* symbolizing imparted power was required by the sign-maker. Since the original sign for hand  was too complex for convenience, it was successively simplified, becoming in turn ,  or ,  or , and even = or ||. As might be expected, older forms survived and continued to be used side by side and interchangeably with those which had been more conventionalized.

The use of a familiar sign, whose meaning was well established, as a *motif* in the formation of new signs was in perfect accord with the methods of the sign-maker. Many examples might be cited to demonstrate that this concrete and graphic mode of representing an idea by the combination of different signs was his most striking characteristic. Fortunately Professor Delitzsch has already collected them in his chapter on "Die 180 bekannten Zeichenkomposita,"¹ so that it is only necessary to call attention to some of the representative examples. The sign , representing food, bread, inserted in , *mouth*, gave , *to eat*. Similarly , *to drink*, was made by inserting , *water*, in , *mouth*. The combination of , *ox*, with , *mountain*, gave  (*rîmu*), *ox of the mountain, wild ox*. The sign , *to depress* or *depression*, inserted within , *earth*, gave , *ravine, deep valley*; while the same sign written within , *enclosure*, appears in , *pool, cistern*.

When the sign-maker required an ideogram for male slave, he took the sign for male, man, archaic , and added to it archaic , *kašâdu*, the character representing conquest and capture, thus creating the sign archaic  (*ardu*), *slave*. Similarly by adding the same sign to the ideogram for female he produced the sign for female slave, archaic  (*amtû*). The

¹ *E&S.*, pp. 41-61

close parallel between this use of $\xi<$ and that of the sign for hand is obvious; each in accord with its respective signification transforms the meaning of the ideogram to which it is appended, the one imparting the idea of dependence and the other that of power.






Several of the most common and at the same time more difficult signs have been selected as suggestive illustrations of the earlier stages in the development of the gunû-sign. It is reasonable to conclude that the discovery of fire preceded that of writing, and if so one of the first things which the primitive sign-makers would desire to represent, would be this wonderful miracle which so fascinated the Oriental of antiquity. In the archaic form of the ideogram for fire $\Xi \diamond \rightleftharpoons$ one recognizes on the right the sign for instrument or wood, in the middle a character which Professor Delitzsch designates as the "Richtungsmotiv,"¹ while the four lines on the left, which in Penn., II., No. 87, col. ii, and elsewhere appears in the form Ξ , are at once identified as the gunû-sign. In the light of the present study, two difficulties connected with Professor Delitzsch's interpretation of this compound ideogram immediately disappear, for the vertical line at the left of the gunû-sign evidently represents a fuller writing of the sign for hand; while the ideogram as a whole instead of consisting of the sign for an instrument or wood and the *Richtungsmotiv*, plus the abstract idea of *Potenzierung*, becomes simple and concrete. The picture is that of a hand, the symbol of power communicated, turned toward the instrument or wood; they, united, vividly suggest the way in which fire was generated by the early man. If we further accept Professor Delitzsch's conclusion that the central character represents the act of turning, the details of the picture become complete.

The sign LAH, archaic $\Xi |||$, with its double significance (1) šukkal-sukallu, *high official, minister*, and (2) laḥ-misû, *to wash*, to interpret which Professors Delitzsch and Hilprecht adduce such widely different and conflicting theories, becomes clear when we recognize the symbol of the potent hand, doubled to indicate greater efficiency. In the one case the strong hand, rendered so by the power communicated by the king to his

¹ E&S., p. 178.

servant (*cf.* the idiom "to take one's hand," p. 301), gives a most graphic representation of the high official or minister of the king, while the same elements, the strong hand or hands,—when their energy is applied to the act of cleansing of which they were the universal instruments among primitive men,—give the verb *to wash*. Another slightly different explanation is also possible, if one part of the sign be regarded as the symbol of the ordinary hand, while the other represents the power communicated by the potent hand; in that case the first meaning would be represented by the hand of the minister, rendered strong by the powerful hand of the king, which rests upon it; and the second would be symbolized by the energetic application of the one hand to the other, which is most suggestive of the act of washing.

These two examples illustrate how naturally and simply the hand came to be used as a *motif*; for here it enters into combination with other signs, just as the sign for bread is written within that for mouth in making the familiar character which represents the act of eating, or as the sign for wood or staff is combined with that for bearer to symbolize the bearer of the staff, namely, the shepherd.

The signs , ID, and , ŠÚ. which originally represented the strength of a man, came in time to symbolize not only human strength but also strength in general, as, for example, that of the gods or of natural forces and finally strength in the abstract, irrespective of its source. Naturally the sign for hand, when used as a *motif* in the gunû-signs, passed through the same stages of historical development, until it became a conventionalized symbol of the increase or *Potenzierung* of the idea represented by the simple sign. In the light of its origin and signification it is obvious why it frequently transformed a simple into an intensive verb. In some instances also an intransitive is changed into a transitive verb. For example the archaic sign , according to II R. 39, 47e, has the value si-malû, *to fill* and *be full*. S^c 66 gives as an equivalent of si-gunû (new Assyrian , dar) šûtturu, which is from  *to be in excess, to surpass the usual amount*, and hence *to be huge, to be distinguished*,¹ which in the šaph'êl always has a transitive meaning,

¹ Cf. Del. *HWB.* 248 b; *EaS.* 67.

namely, *to add to, to make greater, to give*.¹ This change is explained when it is remembered that the *gunû-motif* symbolizes itself a force in action (originally the potent hand), which is fundamentally transitive and therefore sufficient to render transitive the verb upon which its influence is exerted.

In passing, the striking analogy which exists between the change in meaning represented by the intensive stems of the Semitic and certain non-Semitic languages and that effected by the *gunû-motif*, is worthy of notice, for it opens up a broad and important field for investigation. On the other hand a knowledge of the origin of the *gunû-motif* furnishes a new key for the more exact interpretation of the many complex characters which bear the mark of the hand communicating power.

In conclusion we may ask, What was the origin of the term "*gunû*"? Since it was the designation of one of the earliest *motifs* used by the primitive sign-maker, it is probable that its origin is to be sought in the ancient Sumerian rather than the later Babylonian or Assyrian. Professor Sayce's conjecture that the term is derived from the Sumerian *gun*, *tail*,² must be abandoned together with his untenable theory adduced to explain the origin of the *gunû*-signs. Professor Delitzsch is clearly far nearer the truth when he traces its derivation to the Sumerian *gun*, which, according to Sb 369 (*cf.* II R. 38, 14-18*e*) is synonymous with the Assyrian *biltu*.³ In support of his theory of the origin of the *gunû*-signs he prefers to derive it from the secondary meaning of *biltu*, which is that of "burden," *Last*, translating the term *gunû* *Beschwerung*. In view of the evident antiquity of the word it is, however, antecedently much more probable that it is to be associated with the primary and far more common meaning of "tribute, gift." Every Assyrian scholar will recall the recurring phrase *biltu u mandattu*, in which *biltu* is used parallel with *mandattu*, *that which is given by one to another, a gift*. The original and prevailing meaning of the verb *גבל*, from which *biltu* is derived, is "to bring something." In its primary use *biltu* designates—as Professor Delitzsch himself states⁴—"was man

¹ *Cf.* V R. 3, 77; Neb. Grot. I. 15.

² *Lectures upon the Assyrian Language*, p. 154.

³ *EAS.*, p. 66.

⁴ *HWB.*, p. 232, a

darbringt." The fundamental meaning of gun-biltu, therefore, is not that of *Beschwerung*, but of bringing and giving something. Hence the guniring of a simple sign indicates that something has been added to the idea represented by it. A more appropriate term could not be found to describe the gunû-*motif* which symbolizes the impartation of power through the potent hand.